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ABSTRACT

The media constitute important sources and resources for development of critical thought about the media themselves and the reality they represent. The first theories of the media were based on the concept of unidirectional communication. Later, factors such as the increasing interest in audiences and development of cultural studies caused media-audience interaction to be viewed as a two-way process. Through media literacy, educators can foster critical understanding that the media are not self-explanatory reflections of external reality but rather symbolic systems that must be read actively. The media's relation to transformative learning stems from the fact that they require audiences to perform a series of decoding exercises and from the fact that their message, words, and images, which represent different realities, encourage critical reflection and active learning. The mediated messages conveyed by the media become important resources both to question an external representation of reality and the audience's internal assumptions about the given representation. Nevertheless, because the media also represent a great handicap for learners who lack the possibility of interaction with the producer of the message, adult educators teaching media literacy must complement decoding exercises with media literacy activities within the formal educational setting. (Contains 20 references.) (MN)

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The Media and Transformative Learning

Maria Palazón

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The emergence of global forms of mass communication and in particular the growing presence of TV and computer screens in our everyday environment has lead to the development of important research concerning the significance of these media. The following work will present the Media as important sources and resources for the development of critical thought about the media themselves and more importantly about the reality they represent.

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Media: Forms of mass communication involving both a system of symbols and a production/distribution apparatus that creates them.
Media Literacy: An understanding of the forces, interests and means implicated in the production and distribution of mediated messages.
Decoding: 1) "Getting meaning", that is, appropriating the message as a meaningful discourse.
2) Critical reflection on the assumptions and meaning schemes involved in the mediated interpretation of reality.

Most studies about the media have been induced by questions of power; that is, to what extent are they able to influence, publicise, change, teach or sell: products, ideas, beliefs and attitudes; who controls them and in whose interest. Certainly, despite the difficulty researchers face to determine the exact effects of the media, the fact that they have a powerful position in today's society is, nonetheless, undeniable. The relations between the media and learning, their significance and consequently, the possibility and/or desirability of their application in practice, have also been the focus of several publications and works. The debate on this topic usually presents two opposing views: on one hand, the pedagogy of communication promotes a positive view of the media and advocates for their use as pedagogic tools and means to favour international links and forge common values (Cf. Gutierrez). These aspects are reinforced by the utopic theory of McLuhan´s "Global Village" and public discourse on New Technologies (NT) and the Internet. On the other hand, new analysis stipulated that, significant, effective and long-lasting learning could not be achieved by education as entertainment or as the memorisation of given information. It was evident therefore to argue from this premise, that the media, and specially television as the archetype par excellence of this century's entertaining medium and source of constructed and misleading information, should not be considered of use in learning theories.

Nevertheless, the media, 'something which daily intrudes into our lives in ever more sophisticated ways needs to be, itself, the subject of continual public surveillance (...) the media interferes with us; therefore we have a right and a duty to interfere with the media' (Curran & Seaton, 1991:4). The importance of understanding the different uses that can be made of them and their efficiency inside and outside formal educational settings, is central to this discussion. In my opinion the media should be studied and used within the Transformative Learning approach, both as a source and a resource. As a source of images and words, the media convey messages which constitute, to the extent to which they are thus represented, a significant part of 'what others communicate concerning values, ideals, feelings, moral decisions, and such concepts as freedom, justice, love, labor, autonomy, commitment, and democracy' (Mezirow, 1990:9). Likewise, as a resource, the media can be used to prompt the discussion and analysis of assumptions and meaning perspectives constructed precisely on the basis of this "represented reality" -. When the media are presented as a source, it is then necessary to foster a critical understanding of their system and their production / distribution apparatus; whereas their use as a resource can encourage communicative learning via the consumption, reflection and reinterpretation of mediated messages.

The first theories of the media were constructed on the basis of the unidirectional model of communication S → R. From the normative paradigm of the Frankfurt School (Cf. Adorno), which characterises the media as reproducing the dominant ideology favouring this way the status quo, to the research of the Glasgow University Media Group on television news bias (Cf. Golding & Elliott), the emphasis was put on the power of S over R; S being the media institution sending the message and the forces that influenced its functioning, and R, simply the passive receiving part. Later, the increasing interest on audiences, the development of Cultural Studies and the publication in 1980 of Stuart Hall's "Encoding/Decoding", caused a change of paradigm to the model of communication S ↔ R. No longer were the media thought all-powerful vis-à-vis the spectator. The subsequent development of Reception Studies produced a shift of focus in empirical research from the media to the public as an active audience and

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claimed that meanings are negotiated. According to Morley (1980:10), '[t]he activity of "getting meaning" from the message is also problematic practice however transparent and "natural" it may seem' - problematic understood in terms of the intervention of the social/cultural elements with the codes/language elements in the process of interpretation -. This emphasis on the audience as agents in the process of communication prompted new perceptions of the media. In particular, reception studies defined the audience in terms of real individuals, with personal backgrounds, located within specific contexts, as opposed to the "inscribed" readers constructed by the text, complicating and redefining the elements that influence the act of communication.

This emphasis on the audience however, should not undermine the significance of the media whose effects continue to be numerous, often unpredictable and contrasted. How and why it is important to foster a critical understanding of the media is precisely the thesis in Brookfield (1990) *Analyzing the Influence of Media on Learner's Perspectives*. Brookfield claims that the media, one of the main sources from which learners' meaning perspectives are acquired, also encourage viewers to incorporate epistemic distortions. The origin of these distortions are presented as either endemic to the medium, particularly television, or as the result of its constructed messages. Thus for example, Brookfield criticises that 'TV presents itself as a seamlessly authentic "window on the world" [which] fosters in viewers a predisposition to passive observation' (1990:238). His argument is then to offer the development of media literacy and decoding exercises as a solution; that is, 'to engender the habit of watching TV through critical filters' (Ibid.:239).

Through media literacy the educator can foster the critical understanding that 'the media are symbolic (or sign) systems which need to be actively read, and not unproblematic, self-explanatory reflections of external reality' (Brookfield, 1990:237). But the media apparatus is apart from a symbolic system also an industry, producer and distributor of these representations and imageries of reality. Knowing about this business can foster critical reflection on a particular capitalist industrial structure, hence stimulating reinterpretations of the organisation of production, distribution, marketing and consumption. Moreover, studying the industry gives the audience information about how and why are the representations of reality produced, so that they are able to relate the content of the messages to the circumstances of their production, to ownership and funding, to the conditions of programming, agenda setting or advertising. This new perspective enables spectators to distance themselves from these media which have invaded their private spaces. This distance is very important for the individuals whose experience is clearly in discrepancy with the portrayal of reality offered by the media. From this position the individual feels involved on a less personal level which makes it easier to discuss and criticise the differences encountered. Furthermore, media literacy constitutes one of the most important "critical filters" proposed by Brookfield since it already situates the spectator in a position to put into question the source itself. Thus, when the audience knows what are the interests behind the production of certain messages, these are necessarily understood differently and their influence on people can likewise vary.

The second relationship between the media and Transformative Learning that I proposed above concerned more closely the message, the words and images which represented different realities and their use to encourage critical reflection and active learning. The goal of emancipatory education, Mezirow claims, 'is to help learners move from a simple awareness of their experiencing to an awareness of the *conditions* of their experiencing (*how* they are perceiving, thinking, judging, feeling, acting - a reflection on process) and beyond this to an awareness of the *reasons why* they experience as they do and to action based upon these insights' (1991:197). This exercise of reflection can be stimulated by the analysis of how and why we perceive the representation of "present circumstances" in the media.

As we have seen above, perceiving and "getting meaning" from these representations is a problematic practice. This practice was defined by Hall as "decoding": one determinate moment in the communicative exchange so that 'before th[e] message can have an "effect" (however defined), satisfy a "need" or be put to a "use", it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded' (1980:43). In "Encoding/Decoding", S. Hall proposes the mediated message as a constructed text with multiple readings. It is firstly encoded with a dominant sense but when decoded, there is no guarantee that this sense will be understood. He also identified three possible readings of a text: the dominant or preferred when the reader adheres to the text, the negotiated reading when certain parts are accepted and the opposed reading when the reader is in complete disagreement.

Decoding exercises, the second solution offered by Brookfield, as a conscious activity to reinterpret and critically question the signs communicated, their content and assumed "meaning" is in terms of Transformative Learning, significantly different from decoding as a common practice to "getting meaning". If one of the most common devices used by the media is the creation and promotion of expectations, spectators, on the other hand, consume the mediated texts with their own expectations of how things are supposed to be. In this first exercise of decoding a message so that it is appropriated, the spectator reads with

his own meaning perspectives as his reference code. In normal circumstances, Goleman argues that 'we trade off perception and cognition for relief from the anxiety generated when the experience does not comfortably fit these meaning structures' (in Mezirow, 1990:4). In other words, at home or at the movies when the first reading is opposed to our expectations or has to be negotiated, we have a tendency to switch off the TV, change channels, or leave the auditorium. In these cases, the spectator does not decode from the necessary distance which allows him to step back from the message and critically analyse it.

Mezirow argues that 'more central to adult learning than elaborating established meaning schemes is the process of reflecting back on prior learning to determine whether what we have learned is justified under present circumstances' (1990:5). In formal educational settings, reflecting back to determine whether our decoding of mediated messages is justified, is possible. The conflict between the event represented by the mediated message and the spectators' expectations can be the object which initiates questioning about 1) the assumptions that the situation represented makes about reality, 2) what are the conditions that make this representation possible, and 3) the learners' assumptions within which this experience has been assimilated or not. Obviously, the experience does not necessarily reflect a conflictive situation. In those cases in which the viewer decodes from a dominant position, the resulting confirmation of assumptions and agreement are as significant, and should be analysed likewise. The mediated message can under these circumstances become an important resource both to question an external representation of reality and our internal assumptions about this representation.

Nevertheless, the media also represent a great handicap for the learner who hasn't got the possibility of interaction with the producer of the message. In the process of reflecting back on the assumptions made about reality in these messages the learner can only then base his critical thoughts on his knowledge about the media system and apparatus. This is why it is necessary to complement decoding exercises with media literacy, and to realise them within the formal educational setting. In fact, the media are both as a source and a resource, only a part of the triad that makes possible critical reflection and which is constituted principally by the educator and the group, as well as the medium. Given the lack of interaction between the later and the viewer, the educator's participation as guide or pointer-out becomes indispensable. Needless to say, the educator also participates in the exercise since he is himself a viewer. Thus the media is beyond a mere object placed between the educator and the learner, it needs to be taken as an entity with which each of the individuals has a relation. Likewise, the group provides the necessary diversity of decoding practices (relations with the media) which proves the existence of different reference codes.

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